

91-1830

The Archaeology of Boston

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City Archaeology Program
Environment Department
City of Boston

Raymond L. Flynn, Mayor

What is Archaeology?



YOU DO NOT have to go to Italy or Greece to do archaeology. Archaeology involves the study of human behavior by the investigation of material evidence from any time period. Prehistorians are archaeologists who study groups that did not keep their own written records but left behind artifacts (materials modified by man) and archaeological sites (locations where artifacts are found). Historical archaeologists study material evidence of record-keeping societies, including our own.

Archaeological sites must be carefully excavated and records must be kept to help identify the location of any discoveries. In which soil deposit was an artifact found? How old are the artifacts from a particular location? Has the site been disturbed by non-archaeological digging? Does the archaeological record contradict or support what we already know about the site's occupants? These are some of the questions that archaeologists ask when they excavate sites.

Back at the laboratory, specialists and volunteers alike analyze the artifacts and fieldnotes. They attempt to answer more specific questions such as: what kind of animals did Native Americans eat? Did colonial Bostonians import most of their household goods from England? What types of plants did Boston gardeners grow?

Finally, the archaeologists photograph and illustrate the artifacts and prepare a final site report. Ideally, the artifacts are put on public display and field and laboratory records carefully stored for future reference.

Boston's City Archaeology Program

BOSTON's CITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROGRAM promotes quality archaeological work in Boston, locates and protects important Boston archaeological sites and educates and involves the public in Boston archaeology.

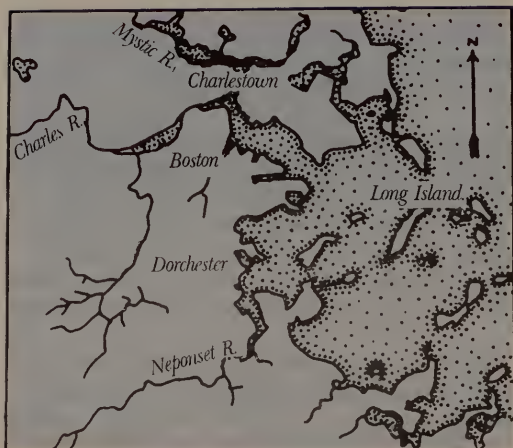
Archaeology has been conducted in greater Boston for more than a century. Local institutions such as Harvard's Peabody Museum founded in 1866 played an important role in studying regional archaeological sites. Much of this early work was crisis-oriented involving the salvage of sites discovered during the course of construction as Boston became urbanized. Historic period sites rarely received any attention.

During the past twenty years urban archaeology has emerged as an important sub-discipline of American archaeology. Archaeology conducted in Boston can contribute to our understanding of urbanization itself. Archaeology yields new information on past land use, architecture, and the daily activities of households often omitted in history books.



You can participate in archaeological work in Boston as a public volunteer. For more information, please call 725-3850 or write to Steve Pendery, Boston City Archaeology Program, Environment Department, Room 805, Boston City Hall, Boston, MA 02201.

Geology and Prehistory



The Boston Harbor today

BOSTON LIES AT THE HEAD of a harbor filled with islands. Glaciers left the region about 12,000 years ago leaving behind low hills composed of gravel, sand, and clay. The harbor was further shaped by a rising sea level and by three rivers, the Mystic, the Charles, and the Neponset.

Native Americans occupied the Boston Area since at least 8,000 years ago. The earliest groups were probably nomadic while the introduction of horticulture into the region about 900 years ago helped to support a larger, more sedentary

population. Prehistoric sites have been found throughout the Boston Harbor islands, in Charlestown, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Boston's Back Bay. European diseases decimated Native American groups in the Boston area between 1616-1619.



Terminal Late Woodland period pottery sherd (ca. A.D. 1500) found on the Boston Common during an archaeological survey conducted by the City Archaeology Program in 1986.

The 17th Century

BOSTON'S FIRST EUROPEAN SETTLER was the Reverend William Blackstone who was living on the south slope of Beacon Hill by 1628. In 1630 he was joined by Governor John Winthrop and members of the Massachusetts Bay Company. Boston attracted thousands of English Puritans and others during the following decade. The deep water harbor was developed with wharves, warehouses and dwellings of merchants and artisans.



Seventeenth century sites examined by archaeologists.

Archaeological study of these sites in downtown Boston and Charlestown has revealed the early involvement of Massachusetts merchants in Atlantic trading networks. Local artisans rapidly began to supply the colony with necessities, and then amenities or urban life. Buildings were designed and some inlets were filled to accommodate the town's rapidly expanding population.

The 18th Century

BOSTON EMERGED as the most important seaport of British North America in the early eighteenth century. Merchants were involved in trading with the West Indies, Europe, Africa, and the southern American colonies. Craftsmen produced a wide variety of goods for export and local use.



The 1775 map of Boston by Henry Pelham showing eighteenth century archaeological sites.

The reconstruction of the Central Artery highway in Boston and Charlestown has provided archaeologists with a recent



opportunity to study colonial sites. These include houselots of merchants and craftsmen, manufacturing and waterfront sites. An archaeological survey of the Boston Common provided information on British troop encampments prior to the American Revolution.

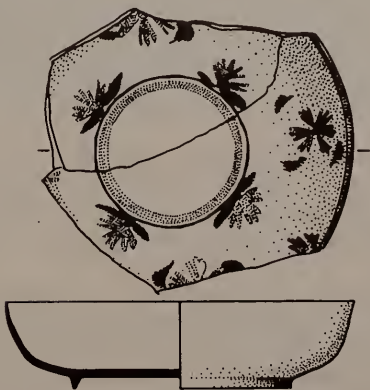
Charlestown redware from the Central Artery project.

The 19th Century



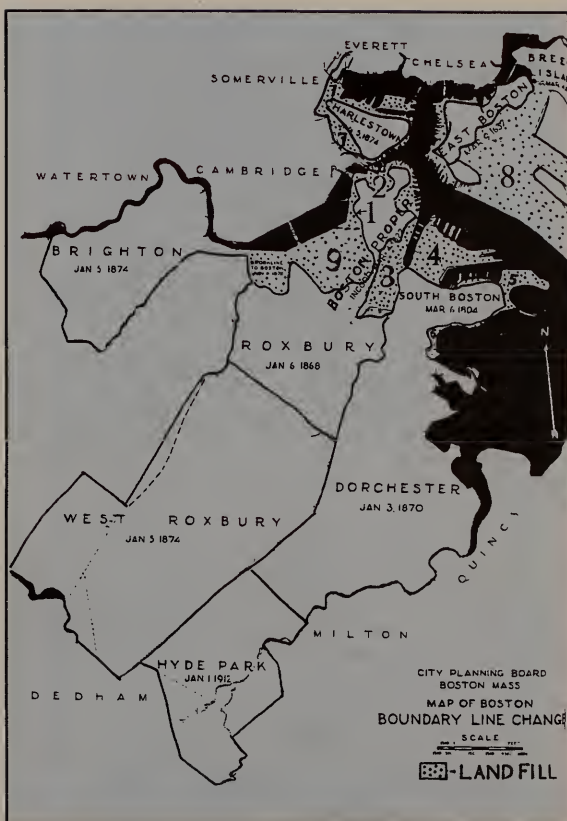
Location of nineteenth century archaeological sites explored in Boston.

FEDERAL PERIOD BOSTON is usually associated with the architecture and planning of Charles Bulfinch. However, the city (incorporated in 1822) was home to different urban groups we rarely read about in history books. Archaeology can tell us much about daily life of working families and ethnic groups in Boston.



Hand-painted pearlware saucer from Boston landfill, ca. 1800.

About Boston



BOSTON'S SURFACE AREA was greatly increased by landfill during the past two centuries. Also, several neighboring towns were annexed between 1634 and 1912 so that today the city is nearly 4 times its original size of 783 acres.

The West Cove (1), about 80 acres and the Mill Cove (2) were filled between 1803 and 1835 with gravel taken from Beacon Hill. Filling of the South Cove (3), about 86 acres, lasted between 1806 and 1843. South Boston's landfill was initiated in 1836 in area 4 (about 714 acres) and continued in Marine Park (5) and Columbus Park (6). Both Charlestown (7) and East Boston (8) including most of Logan Airport were greatly expanded by landfill. Boston's Back Bay (about 570 acres) was filled between 1856 and 1894 (area 9).